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The Premise Of Anarchism

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Sometimes words are just words — interchangeable and discardable — but sometimes a word belies a knot in our thought, tightly wound and tensely connected. “Anarchy” is one such word.

Centuries ago the English peasantry rose up to overthrow the king and radically remake society. The vanguard of this revolution, the levellers and the diggers, sought to demolish the feudal hierarchy, to revise property and the division of land. In their revolt they were joined by opportunists who sought the overthrow of the king to assert their own power. Naturally these factions clashed. It was in this civil war that the word “anarchy” was leveraged to great effect. Those with the audacity to explicitly oppose anyone ruling over anyone were characterized as desiring “anarchy,” and when this happened the idealistic rebels were forced to backpeddle, to stumble and prevaricate on a trap built into their very language.

The word “anarchy” originates in the Greek word “an-archia” (“without rulership”). Over the last couple millennia it has grown two simultaneous associations: 1) the absence of domination and constraint and 2) a war of competing would-be-rulers. The latter redefinition inspired by the constant conflict between princes and

small lords that it was felt had gripped Europe during the Middle Ages in the absence of a single ruler. While the first definition is clearly the better fit to the word's etymology the latter signified something more properly akin to "spas-archy" or *fractured* domination than the absence of domination. But in practice these two definitions grew to be lumped together as the same thing, functionally serving as an orwellianism. Like a more condensed version of the phrase "freedom is slavery" the invocation of "anarchy" thus served to write out of our language the ability to speak of a world that wasn't characterized by domination. To desire the end of domination was thus transmuted into merely desiring a different, more decentralized, configuration of domination.

This perspective mirrors that of our rulers and would-be-rulers who cannot conceive of anything besides rule-or-be-ruled. It's the fascistic or authoritarian perspective in which there exists nothing besides the game of power. If rulership is all there is — if it is inescapable — then the "without rulership" of "an-archy" signifies a senseless and incoherent concept, and the word should, in the authoritarian mind, be reassigned to more productively characterize a less centralized set of power relations.

This reframing of anarchy in terms of centralization rather than domination is an obvious trick because decentralized expressions of rulership or interpersonal domination can clearly be quite severe. Parental abuse of children, partner abuse, sexual violence, community ostracization, and many other informal power dynamics of social capital are often far more visceral and constraining in many people's actual lives than war, taxes, and police repression. Exploitation at the hand of the thief or bandit, the mugger or rapist, the brigand and minor warlord, is hardly any different than at the hand of a cop or bureaucrat.

Centralization and decentralization each have their own efficiencies and inefficiencies when it comes to domination and constraint. Centralization allows one to take advantage of certain economies of scale, but decentralization can allow more intimate and attentive

Our world is gripped in shortsightedness, not just in means but in its ends. We are caught up in a myopia that obscures the freedom to be found in others, that tells us to identify with the limits set for us — to see freedom as another flavor of domination, and tyranny as liberation from the complexities of true engagement. It tells us that we are the clothes we happen to wear and not the conscious act of choice between them. It pleads with us to believe that freedom is a thing impossible, incoherent, irreconcilably fractured.

Anarchism is not and has never been a proclamation that if we overthrow a given state — wherever the extent of that state is to be drawn — utopia will immediately result. Anarchism is not a claim about “human nature” or a simplistic reflex of negation. Anarchism is daring to see beyond the suffocating language of power.

Anarchism is the lifting of our eyes beyond our immediate pre-occupations and connecting with one another. Seeing the same spark, the same churning hurricane, same explosion of consciousness, within them that resides within us. Anarchism is the recognition that liberty is not kingdoms at war, but a network interwoven and ultimately unbroken — a single expanse of possibility growing every day. Anarchism is the realization that freedom has no owners. It has only fountainheads.

abuse. It makes little sense to quibble over whether the decentralization of the Rwandan genocide made it more efficient at horror than Third Reich. Decentralization may be a necessary condition of liberation, but it alone is hardly sufficient — the real issue is domination itself.

Similarly, domination can be quite sharply constraining even without a clearly defined hierarchy. Two people can chain each other down, sometimes without either ever getting an advantage. Indeed we often interact in ways that are mutually oppressive. More complex or balanced dynamics of domination that defy description in terms of a simple hierarchy do not necessarily diminish the domination at play.

For those of us who seek the abolition of such dynamics altogether, who strive in the direction of a world entirely without domination, without rulership over one another, it is impossible to avoid a contest over the definition of anarchy. Language channels and focuses our thoughts; a definition determines what can be expressed succinctly and what presumptions we will gravitate towards. So it was like a thunderclap when in the nineteenth century someone finally declared that “*Anarchy is order, government is civil war*” and a movement promptly grew like wildfire. We declared ourselves “anarchists” as a provocation, but also as a corrective. Because we will never be able to make serious headway towards freedom unless the concept itself is conceivable.

Unfortunately just as the term “anarchy” has been saddled with negative associations, so too has our concept of “freedom” become muddied in ways that often keep us chained. In wider society “freedom” is often used in very loose ways; if we dislike something we’ll characterize the absence of it as “freedom from” it. This “freedom” refers to nothing more than negation of a given thing. And obviously “not” can never coherently function as a general ideal — “negation” is meaningless when not paired with some specific concept. The absence of one thing always means the presence of another thing.

Thus is this sense of “freedom” invoked by authoritarians of all colors. The soldiers and the cops beating us are said to “protect our freedom” — which is to say a freedom from disruption, the freedom to exist in a certain state of affairs, no matter how noxious. The “freedom” to maintain a certain static culture or set of traditions, “free” from change and challenge. This sort of freedom is never anything more than the securing and preserving of some kind of identity, some specific static world. Thus does the conservative quite seriously declare that two gay men holding hands in the public square violates his freedom.

To survive conflicts of such “freedoms” a number of systems of detente have been proposed. The most common today is a propertarian resolution wherein the world is physically divided up and within each clearly demarcated bubble owners may structure things according to their unique desires or identities.

There are certainly many practical upsides to giving everyone their own garden to play in! But — as an abstract — the negative concept of “freedom” obscures the positives to collaboration as well as the innate arbitrariness and constraint of static identity.

To worship a notion of freedom as isolation from outside forces would leave us all chained in prisons, frozen statues walled off and incapable of engagement and development. This notion of freedom as rigamortis — the “freedom” of the coffin — is innately authoritarian. But it’s also deeply arbitrary. It’s not clear which authority or identity we should adopt. There are many different corpses we might strive to reduce ourselves to, forever “free” of further external influence. What mere “freedom from” deprives from us is active agency. True freedom is of course not about retreating from or walling off outside influences but rather having *choice* in our interactions with the world.

Not a single isolated “choice” of a certain identity or role, but continual, engaged, active choice, every moment of our lives.

When we truly live we are hurricanes of self-reflection, pulling in knowledge and influences from the wider world — the universe

options, we must have more options to choose from — deeper and richer in their scope and impact on the world around us.

And just as it severs our capacity to connect in direct ways, power cuts us off from truth. It encourages manipulation and constraints on the flow of information, which necessarily oppresses us all because a lack of accuracy means a lack of agency. The less grounded our models of the world are the less actual choice we truly have to act within it, the more futilely our actions grasp at empty air rather than connecting and moving the world. A lie is often a complex knot that binds and ignorance can seem to provide complex options, but simple truths open real possibilities.

This focus on deeper realities rather than abstract or ‘practical’ rules of thumb is, incidentally, why we are called radicals. “Radical” stems from “radix” the Latin word for root, and signifies not necessarily an *extreme* position but rather a view that gets to the fundamentals of things. To be a radical is to seek to identify and address the most basic, the most deeply rooted dynamics. To start from the foundations. The radical is only an extremist from the perspective of a world that has abandoned earnest inquiry and lost sight of the most basic truths.

Ours is sadly a world of “good enough”, of the “practical”, of the immediate at the expense of all else. We have all seen what such a world creates. Misery and encircling mutual enslavement. Too often we worship and cling to the barest of impressions, the most superficial of identities and common banners. We look for quick fixes again and again, hoping to solve myriad social problems and conflicts with the blunt instrument of the state, ignoring the collateral damage and deepening crises such means create. We recoil from the longer, harder, more painstaking path of building a new world in the shell of the old — of spreading and nourishing new relations, projects, norms, and technologies that increasingly make unsustainable our world’s instruments of domination — a path that requires complex resistance, continual struggle, with no easy resolution, no comforting collusion.

nomic relations in similar directions, encouraging hierarchy and monopoly.

We are not allowed to create or interact except in ways that are easily visible to and controllable by the state. You are either forced to work under the state itself or under a business reflective of it and compliant to it. Everyone else is shuffled into a pool of desperate “unemployed” or given welfare under intense constraints — we are in countless ways barred from providing for ourselves rather than begging before a boss or bureaucrat. Under the guise of “public quality” individuals are violently suppressed for selling tamales or cigarettes, and most collective endeavors that treat all participants as equals are banned unless they can grease enough hands and jump through enough red tape. We have been systematically dispossessed of almost all means of living out from under the thumb of one tyrant or another by centuries of genocide, slavery, and imperialism. Repeated theft in countless arenas has concentrated control into the hands of the few and curtailed our opportunities.

This ecosystem of power also nurtures a psychology of brutal competition, not only among those who seek its power, but also among those it represses, twisting them into seeing the world as it does, in terms of power rather than freedom. It violently simplifies our relations with one another into centralized structures and encourages us to struggle to dominate one another.

Statism isolates. Its centralization is just another way to say that power severs and impedes our connectivity. Instead of distributed resilient social networks statism stokes hierarchy and segregation, giving us each fewer options in our relations with others and holding back what is possible on the whole.

This point about connectivity is an important one that strikes deeper than the specific problems of centralization. It’s not enough to not be imprisoned or held down by clear chains, you have to have channels by which to act in the world. A wall has the same effect as a chain. It’s not enough to be able to say “no” to a handful of

wrapping in on itself in a self-awareness that expands the scope of what is possible. To truly be free — liberated of constraints — can only mean to have more options. Not confined within some arbitrary box, but radiating ever outward into the world.

Note that such freedom *isn’t* a zero sum game. Every single person can remake the world. Creation and discovery are not exclusive acts. A society where every person was equally unleashed, to discover titanic insights or create profoundly moving art, would not be a gray world of mediocrity because impact and influence is not a scarce good. We can each be heroes, we can each change everything, we can each bring more options into the world.

In this proper light there is no inherent conflict between the freedom of individuals because freedom is a larger and more general phenomenon. To fire a gun at your neighbor’s head would gravely deprive the world of possibility. True freedom is not predicated on the imprisonment of others but rather their liberation.

In our muddied and corrupted language it’s often easy to mistake power and freedom as the same thing. Yet unlike power — which is a kind of directed capacity, a relation between distinct entities — freedom resists disentanglement. To slice the world apart into arbitrary selves and arbitrary structures is to curtail what is possible. Rulership is always relation of constraint. Domination over another person is often assumed to expand the capabilities of the ruler at the expense of the ruled, yet in practice power usually constrains both. On some occasions the ruler does expand their ‘personal freedom’ at the cost of overall freedom but the anemic and arbitrary sense of self required for such a trade-off is its own prison.

To divorce yourself from the spark of freedom in another is to identify with something other than freedom — to reject the active spark that gives you life as an actor in this world and consign it to death in the name of some happenstance idol. Ultimately you can either value freedom or some random dead static thing. Some specific state of affairs rather than motion and agency. To identify

with freedom, to truly live, to embrace possibility, is to reject and overcome all walls, including those between one another.

Your freedom is my freedom because freedom tolerates no divisions, accepts no adjectives, belongs to no one. There is simply freedom or constraint. Liberation or rulership. This common empathy in liberty is the foundation that makes anarchy a coherent idea, that makes a world without rulership conceivable.

Anarchism is more sweeping and more ambitious than any of the political platforms it is often compared with. As you can see we can never make a simple list of demands because our aspirations are ultimately infinite. By declaring ourselves for the abolition of rulership itself we have created a space for striving; the furthest particulars will always be unsettled. Anarchism does not represent a final state of affairs, but a direction, a vector pointing beyond all possible compromises. As the old saying goes we don't want bread or even the bakery, we want the stars too. And anarchists have gone in many directions, exploring many concerns and dynamics.

However there are some unavoidable conclusions to our embrace of freedom.

Most famously we oppose the state. Government is defined by its monopoly on coercion — it cannot act but through aggression, every law or edict it passes is imposed by a centralized apparatus of violence. The state is in short a forcible simplification of human relations, a system caught up in feedback loops that strengthen its tyranny. Rather than building tolerable and fluidly responsive agreements from the ground up, the state imposes one rigid vision from the top down. Its monopoly on overwhelming violence provides a shortcut to accomplishing things that bypasses full negotiations; not only does this approach suppress freedom in the name of expediency it encourages everyone to do the same. Once the state exists it presents a tool that cannot be ignored — if you want to get a given task done the state makes it enticing to do it through competing for, seizing, and directing the state's coercion. Nearly

everyone becomes invested in expanding the power of the state so that it can assure or enact their desires.

The state that is so often defended as a means of solving collective action problems is itself a catastrophic collective action problem, with mass murderous consequences. The state suppresses us all, chains us in service to a limited number of tasks, inherently simplistic directives that can never fully reflect our complex array of desires. The state rules us, but it always seems easier to fight for control of the state, to struggle to win the lottery for its hamfisted power, than to dissolve its chains.

States formed historically from brutal domination and have persisted so virally because they are mistakes hard to unmake. Nevertheless at different points enlightened people throughout history have successfully dissolved states — to varying degrees and with varying permanence. In our era it lies before us to dissolve not just one state but the entire global ecosystem of cancerous power systems (both formal nationstates and the smaller state-like entities they encourage from corporations to gangs to cliques) and establish a more decentralized and responsive society with not just a few token checks and balances against power, but countless social structures acting as antibodies and an entire populace committed to fighting its emergence.

There are many possible norms, instincts, and patterns of organization that impede and check relations of domination, but those that worked in the past have atrophied in our society and those approaches that show new promise are — like any radical change — challenging to establish and popularize.

This is obviously no trivial task, statism is reinforced not merely through the violent threat of the police but through a culture that embraces domination and an infrastructure that encourages centralized social relations. The state nurtures organizational and technological forms in its image — simplistic and centralized — so as to more easily engage with them, and its heavy hand distorts eco-